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C O N F I D E N T I A L COLOMBO 001515

SIPDIS

DEPARTMENT FOR SA, SA/INS, DS/IP/ITA, DS/IP/SA

E.O. 12958: DECL: 09/13/2014

TAGS: PREL KIRF CE

SUBJECT: IN PROTEST AT EMBASSY, BUDDHIST MONKS CALL FOR A USG BAN ON "HOLLYWOOD BUDDHA"

REF: COLOMBO 1503 (NOTAL)

Classified By: James F. Entwistle, Deputy Chief of Mission. Reason 1.4 (b,d).

¶1. (C) ONE GROUP OF MONKS PROTEST "HOLLYWOOD BUDDHA:" On September 13, the U.S. Embassy was again the site of a protest, led by Buddhist monks, against "Hollywood Buddha," a newly released film in the United States. Three Buddhist monks from the National Bhikku ("Monk") Council, an organization associated with the Sinhala-nationalistic Jathika Hela Urumaya (JHU) party, presented two letters to poloff requesting that the USG "take necessary steps to ban this movie immediately." (While connected with the protest, the letter hand-over was pre-arranged, with the monks prepared to enter the Embassy's inspection room to deliver them.) Although not included in the English translation, the Sinhala version of the letter stated that the United States, a "Christian country," would not tolerate a Christian image being used in an insulting way. The monks, one of whom was a JHU member himself, informed poloff that Sri Lanka was tolerant of all religions, but warned that unrest among Sri Lankans could occur if the movie was allowed to continue showing. Poloff replied to the monks that the United States was also respectful of all religions, including Buddhism, and that the United States government was not involved in the making of the film nor could it censor it anyway. She urged the monks to contact the movie director and producer directly to voice their views. (Note: According to local press, Sri Lankan Ambassador Subasinghe has been in touch with the producer, who has already apologized publicly.)

¶2. (SBU) The group of roughly 150 protesters, including Buddhist monks and schoolchildren, demonstrated for approximately 20 minutes before peacefully departing. The Embassy local guard force and members of the local police station provided Embassy security and crowd management, keeping the traffic moving in front of the Embassy building throughout.

¶3. (C) ANOTHER GROUP OF SINHALESE NATIONALISTS PROTEST: Separate from the September 13 protest, Mission received a faxed letter from the Patriotic National Movement, another Sinhalese nationalistic organization aligned with the leftist Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP) party. (One of the eight signatures on the letter was that of Wimal Weerawansa, JVP MP and Propaganda Secretary.) The letter stated that the director's efforts to address the situation -- such as the removal of the offensive advertising poster -- were inadequate and called on the government to demand the removal of "all scenes which ridicule Buddhism." The letter characterized "Hollywood Buddha," which "scoffs at Lord Buddha's character and His teaching" as "unethical." It further declared that the movie, along with other anti-Buddhist efforts, were part of a "conspiracy to incite Buddhists towards a religious war."

¶4. (C) COMMENT: The Buddhist monks and nationalistic Sinhalese who have been most strident about "Hollywood Buddha" are from the extremes of the political spectrum. These two groups also helped lead the legal charge in Sri Lanka to institute a religious "anti-conversion" bill. The majority of Sri Lankans have not been vocal about the movie. The small sizes of the two protests indicate the low level of interest and/or the understanding by Colombo-based Buddhists, at least, that the USG is not involved with the film. END COMMENT.
LUNSTEAD